

Twilight

WLADYSLAW REYMONT

(1868-1925)

SOKOL LAY DYING. He had been lying thus a long time. He had fallen sick, and was kicked about like a useless carcass. Good people said it would be wrong to kill him, even though his handsome hide would make such fine leather. Yes, good people let him die slowly, alone and forgotten. The same good souls rewarded him with a kick, occasionally, to remind him that he was dying too slowly. But they took no other notice of him. Once in a while the hunting dogs, with whom he had been wont to leap in the chase, came to visit him. But dogs have ugly souls . . . (from too much contact with human beings). And at every call of their masters they left Sokol precipitately. Only Lappa, an old blind Siberian hound, stayed with him longer than the rest. He lay dozing under the feed trough, oppressed with sorrow at the sight of Sokol, whose large, pleading, tearful eyes frightened him.

So the old horse was left to his solitary misery. The days kept him company . . . golden, rosy days, or grey and harsh and painful ones, filling the stall with their weeping. . . . They peered into his eyes, then silently departed, as if awe-stricken. . . .

But Sokol was afraid only of the nights, the short, fearful, silent, stifling nights of June. It was then that he felt he was surely dying. . . . And he became almost frantic with terror. He would tear at his halter, and beat with his hoofs against the wall . . . he wanted to escape . . . to run and run. . . .

One day, as the sun was setting, he jumped up, stared at the flecks of light that filtered in through the cracks in the walls, and began to neigh long and plaintively. Not a single voice answered him from the close heavy stillness of the departing day. Swallows flitted by, and chirped from their nests, or darted like feathered arrows among the golden host of insects that buzzed in the sun's last rays. From the distant meadows was heard the sharp ringing and swishing of busy

scythes. And from the fields of grain and flowers came a rustling, and humming, and whispering.

But about Sokol there was a deep, awful silence that made him shiver. Sombre panic seized him; he began to tug frenziedly at his halter . . . it broke, and he fled into the yard.

The sun blinded him, and a wild pain gnawed at his entrails. He lowered his head, and stood motionless, as if stunned. Little by little, however, he came to himself again; dim memories of fields, forests, meadows, floated through his brain. . . . There awoke in him a resistless desire to run . . . a longing to conquer vast distances . . . a craving thirst to live again. . . . He began to seek eagerly for an exit from the yard. It was a square yard, three sides of which were shut in by various buildings. He searched in vain. He tried again and again, though he could barely stand on his legs, though every movement caused him indescribable pain, though the blood kept flowing from his old sores. . . .

At last he struck a wooden fence from which he could see the manor house. He gazed at the flower-covered lawn before it, where dogs were basking, at the house itself with its windows glittering golden in the sun, and began to neigh pleadingly, piteously. . . .

If anyone had come and said a kind word to him, or smoothed his coat caressingly, he would willingly have lain down and died. But all about was deserted, drowsy, still. . . .

In despair he began to bite the rails and wrench the gate, leaning against it with all his weight. It burst open, and he walked into the garden. He approached the veranda, still neighing plaintively; but no one heard him. He stood thus a long time, gazing at the curtained windows, and even tried to climb up the steps. Then he walked all around the house.

Suddenly he seemed to forget everything. . . . He saw only visions of vast grainfields, as limitless as the sea, stretching away to a distant, endlessly distant, horizon. Bewitched

by these alluring fancies he began to stagger and stumble forward with all his waning might. . . .

Sokol shivered. His eyes grew glazed with suffering. He breathed heavily and nosed the damp grass to cool his heated nostrils. . . . He was very thirsty . . . but he kept staggering onward, impelled by his somber panic and the resistless impulse to escape. As he stumbled among the stalks of wheat and corn, his feet grew heavier and heavier. The furrows were like pitfalls; the grass entangled his feet and dragged him down. The bushes barred his path. The whole earth seemed to pull him eagerly toward itself. Often the grain hid the horizon from his gaze.

His poor dumb soul sank deeper and deeper into the darkness of terror. Recognizing nothing, he kept staggering blindly forward as in a fog. A partridge, leading her brood, flew up suddenly between his legs, causing him to start in affright and remain motionless, without daring to stir. Crows that flew silently across the fields stopped, on observing him, and sat down on a pear tree, cawing and croaking evilly.

He dragged himself into the meadow, and sank exhausted to the ground. He stretched out his legs, looked up into the skyey wastes, and sighed piteously. The crows flew down from the trees and hopped along the ground nearer and nearer. The corn bent over and stared at him with its red, poppy eyes. Still nearer came the crows, sharpening their beaks in the hard grass tufts. Some flew over him, cawing ravenously, lower and lower, till he saw their terrible round eyes, and half-open beaks. But he could not stir. He struck his paws into the ground and fancied he was up again, galloping across the field . . . in the chase . . . the hounds beside him barking . . . flying like the wind. . . .

His agony grew so intense that he gave one savage neigh and sprang to his feet. The crows flew away, screeching. . . .

But now he saw nothing . . . understood nothing. . . .

Everything wavered about him . . . spun, tossed, crashed. . . . He felt himself sinking, as in a deep mire. . . . A cold shiver ran over his body, and he lay still. . . .

The sun sank. Obliterating twilight covered everything with a silent mantle. The barking of a dog grew audible in the distance.

Lappa ran up to his friend, but Sokol did not recognize him. The old dog licked him, pawed at the ground, ran barking across the field hither and thither, calling for help, but no one came. . . .

The grass looked into Sokol's wide-open eyes. . . . The trees approached him, and reached out their sharp clawlike twigs to him. The birds grew still. Thousands of living things began to crawl over his body, to pinch, and claw, and rend his flesh. . . . The crows cawed frightfully.

Lappa, bristling with terror, moaned and howled weirdly. . . .